

Reading for pleasure

Kenny Pieper offers some ideas to help struggling readers acquire the reading habit

Tom sits cross-legged in the library. He's not a reader, never has been, and I can see this is difficult for him. It's not only that he doesn't like reading or doesn't like this particular book; he finds reading difficult.

It's difficult because he really wants to please me, his new English teacher, in the first week of term in his new school. He wants to like it – he really does – and he concentrates hard so as not to move his lips as he reads. He wants to read *A Series of Unfortunate Events* by Lemony Snicket because his friend liked the books, and he watched the movie over the summer and quite liked it too. He can't do it though. He can't really read, you see.

Tom is probably representative of hundreds (maybe thousands) of kids going through the same thing that week. What have we done to him? He is 11 years old and has lost, or never discovered, the joy of submerging himself in a book. He's had seven years of school and is sitting and hoping forlornly that it will all click into place for him. Until that happens, he'll feel excluded from an amazing world: a world his friends inhabit comfortably.

A passport to everywhere

It was the desperate need to change the life chances of children like Tom that prompted me to write: *Reading for Pleasure – A Passport to Everywhere*. My intention was to share some of the strategies I've used in classes over the years; but I also wanted to raise some issues about the manner in which we, as teachers, help to create, even embed, negative attitudes to reading. Lack of choice, lack of good books when there is a choice, lack of time to read in school and lack of care together with a culture where reading for pleasure has become an extravagant extra in the classroom.

Meanwhile, the correlation between poverty and low literacy levels is well documented. Amongst the sobering statistics highlighted by *The Read On. Get On* campaign is the fact that over half of children from the most deprived areas of Scotland leave primary school not reading well.



The link between poverty and low literacy levels is decisively broken at Aldermoor Farm School (see pages 16-19), where children 'develop a love of reading very early in their time in school, and are able to read fluently and with evident enjoyment by the time they leave.' (Ofsted 2015)

You have to wonder about a system that, after 50-odd years of free compulsory education, has failed to narrow the literacy gap between the rich and poor. Despite the necessity of schooling in their lives and the teachers who tell them education will help them get a better job, young people often see older brothers and sisters ending up in the same low-paid jobs as their parents and grandparents. And the cycle continues. What could reading give them that would change that?

That is why I think it is essential that we devote more time to promoting a love of reading at the expense of almost everything else we do. This doesn't necessarily have to mean a love of fiction. Every subject teacher needs to encourage kids to read about their

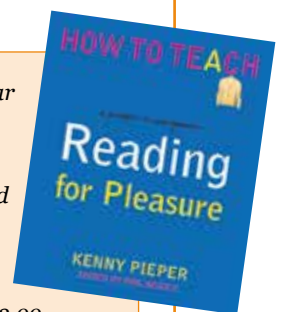
subject and to provide high quality materials that interest them. Kids who read well across the curriculum are in a more advantageous position to succeed in school and in life outside school.

Reading as a habit rather than an imposition gives us the opportunity to build up our background knowledge and develop those reading skills, increase our understanding of the world and move on to more challenging work. It becomes part of what we do.

I really believe that those who see themselves as readers – and I make the distinction with those who merely read – become active students, and will become more active citizens and, one fine day, the thoughtful, intelligent, hard-working people we want them to be.

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Ten minutes



Photo courtesy of Aldermoor Farm School

The authors of the *Read On. Get On* report (Scotland) believe that 'as little as 10 minutes [of reading] a day can make a big difference in a child's life'

Like teachers everywhere, I'm required to cover all the content and tick all the boxes of the curriculum. So to commit time to allowing my students to read for pleasure – free reading, if you like – is a big commitment. But what do I expect back?

Ten minutes. Every lesson. I see all of my classes up to S4 (Year 11) four times a week. Four times 10 minutes makes 40 minutes. If they do 10 minutes of reading homework as well, the figure doubles to 80 minutes, and in some cases more. I don't expect to get an immediate return for this effort, but as the habit begins to take hold, good things start to happen.

The environment in the classroom has to be conducive to reading, however. At the beginning of every lesson, my students enter quietly – often they will meet me standing at the door, reading. They quietly get their books out and start reading too. There are no questions. They must not interrupt my reading or anyone else's. Silence. Ten minutes every day. If they have forgotten their book or finished it, they can get another one from the class library (see right) or update their dialogue reading journals. Either way, they must not interrupt the reading of others. That's my starter. Every time.

It can be a slow process, but they

get the hang of it. The younger ones, especially, need the time to develop and grow into this habit: they can arrive from primary school with a continued need for attention and validation from their teacher, so ignoring them for ten minutes can be a challenge initially.

If at first you don't succeed...

A young boy I taught a couple of years ago failed an assessment I knew he was capable of passing. He was a disengaged kid, likeable but uninterested. Nevertheless, he had made some great progress that year, yet he barely completed half of the questions. What I later discovered was that he had been secretly reading Nick Hornby's *Siam* under the desk.

Should I have been more observant? Probably. Should I be proud of him? Definitely. And while he may never become a professor at Highbrow University, this boy is a reader.

The class he belonged to was challenging for many reasons, but I had persisted with 10 minutes of reading every lesson, even when resistance from some and open hostility from others made it extremely tempting to give up and do something else. If I didn't make the extra effort to persuade them to read, who else was going to do it? If it didn't happen now, then when?

A quality class library

When I was first given my own classroom, it had a bookcase filled with books: some classics, some unheard of, some brilliant, some awful. A good start? Not really. They were in a dreadful state: dog-eared, graffitied with every bodily part you could imagine, and scrawled with the sorts of insult only teenage boys can dream up. The covers were ripped or ripped off. Faced with this second-rate selection, is it any wonder that pupils didn't want to read?

So here's your choice. You could persist in attempting to convince Year 11 that, despite their looks (and remember what you don't judge a book by), these are great books. Or you could do what I did: get a big black bin liner, dump the sorry broken specimens and start again. It's the only way.

I've made a point of never offering up something to a student that I wouldn't want to read myself, and I wouldn't have picked up those tatty old books. Of course we judge books by their covers. Always have, always will. So, even if your departmental budget won't stretch to new books, start to pick up the odd second-hand one here and there. I've even bought them with Christmas book tokens. It builds up – and you can choose the titles you want on your shelf. Get them wherever you can, but get them.

Interest inventory

I got the idea of an interest inventory from *Igniting a Passion for Reading: Successful Strategies for Building Lifetime Readers* by Steven Layne.

It allows me to tap into the prior knowledge and experiences of my

students, at the very least providing me with a foothold onto something that might begin to build a reader.

My list comprises a series of questions which ask students to tell me about their lives – their hobbies and passions, favourite movies and books,

their dreams, but it can be anything you think might be interesting; it's totally up to you.

I hand this out during the first week of term and, when completed, I keep them in a ring binder to which I can refer throughout the year.

Interest inventory

Name

1. What do you like to do in your spare time?

2. Do you belong to any clubs or teams? If so, what are they? If not, why not?

3. What kinds of movies do you like? Why?

4. What are your favourite sports? Why? There can be more than one if you like.

5. If you had three wishes, what would they be?

6. What kinds of books do you own?

7. If you had a surprise day off school, how would you spend it?

8. If you could transport yourself to any time or place in the past, where would you go?

9. If you had the chance to meet any famous person, living or dead, who would it be? Why?

10. If you could pick any three books from a bookshop for free, what would they be about?

11. If you could go on a trip to any place in the world today, where would you go?

These pupil profiles prove to be useful in lots of ways throughout the year. They can be your best friend at moments of the greatest resistance, when you feel that you are making no progress at all and are about to give up on that difficult

pupil with whom you are struggling to connect. The knowledge that they like Superman comics, or surfing, or ponies could be a little conversation piece that helps you begin to build a relationship. And, of course, it allows you to go

hunting for a book, a magazine or even a newspaper article that might excite their interest. If you can get just one piece of writing into their hands that they actually want to read, then you have made a start.

The school library

I try to ensure that my classes go to the library at least once a week. Many of the pupils are seasoned readers and library rules are second nature to them. But some have never been to a library before and don't know how to behave or what to do.

By the end of the first visit, I have already recognised four or five 'Toms', not all of them boys. One of them picks up a 700-page novel, the others pick up books without even looking at them. This is why a teacher talking about books, every day, whenever possible, is so important. These guys need to hear what books can do, recognise what they can find in them, talk about what they might discover. They need to see us reading, picking up a book, carrying one around, being readers.

So discussing books becomes the device I use as I model the life of a reader. When we're in the library, I tell them about my reading: what confuses me, what entertains me, what makes me laugh. And I ask the same of them. Back in the classroom, telling others about what they have read becomes part of everyday life. Recommendations fly

round the room. We have book speed-dating (see below) and other activities that get them talking. When teaching language points, I reach for my current novel and discuss a particular image, the use of contrast or an effective use of the colon. As a result, Tom starts to see

that reading is useful to him. He begins to enjoy his 10 minutes at the beginning of every lesson. Sometimes he will even read for 10 minutes at night and come in and talk about it. Excitedly.

As the year progresses, the library becomes his space too. He is included.



Picture: the National Literacy Trust

Sharing books and telling others what you find interesting, entertaining, or perhaps confusing, is part of the joy of becoming a 'reader' as opposed to someone who just reads

Book speed-dating

Students sit in two rows of 15 facing each other. I ask them, very quickly, to think about how they might 'sell' their current book to their partner. Not an easy task, but they usually scratch something together.

On the first bell, the 15 on the left start talking about their books. They summarise, they sell and they repeat. After 30 seconds, I ring the bell again. The group opposite start up.

After another 30 seconds, I ring the bell again and those on the left move along one seat. Bell. Go again. The 15 on the left repeat their 30-second sales pitch, perhaps slightly more confidently this time, slightly more assured and

focused. They get better each time they do it. Meanwhile, the room seems to get noisier as they begin to relax and enjoy themselves, starting to understand the rules. They are moving, talking, having fun.

By the time they've been all the way round, 15 minutes have passed. They have repeated their talks 15 times. They have heard another 15 short book talks. I give them a heart-shaped sticky note and ask them to go and find the book they fancy most.

This provides a few more minutes of chatter about books, reminders and confirmations. We leave the sticky notes on the board for a day or two, so they can check out other students' choices, as

can other classes. They leave the room talking about books. The next time they go to the library, they take their sticky notes with them.

Book speed-dating is great fun, but it also allows you to nurture several skills: the nature of multiple talks ensures that your pupils are learning to summarise properly and make decisions about what is important; they hear 15 other reviews, so they can no longer employ the excuse that 'they don't know any good books'; they may well be fulfilling any assessment for talk outcomes that you have to cover; most importantly, you are embedding a culture where books are something we share and enjoy and have fun with.

FIND OUT MORE

- **Read On. Get On.** There are two separate but related campaigns, each launched by a coalition of partners.
- **Scotland:** <http://bit.ly/sc235-40>
- **England:** <http://bit.ly/sc235-41>